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DE RUEHTO #0020 0050911  
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FM AMEMBASSY MAPUTO  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6623  
INFO RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY

UNCLAS MAPUTO 000020

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AF/S FOR HTREGER  
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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: INDEPENDENT MOZAMBICAN TV STATION'S EQUIPMENT  
SEIZED

11. On Friday, December 29, the Maputo-based television station "STV" reported in its main nightly newscast that law enforcement officers with a warrant from the Maputo City Court entered the newsroom that day at 1:30 p.m. and seized 18 computers, three DVCAM VCRs, and several pieces of office equipment. STV is owned by the independent media company SOICO, whose newsroom also houses the "O Pais" newspaper, "FAMA" magazine, and "SFM" radio. In the previous week, two of the company's leased minibuses were also seized.

12. The December 29 seizure was due to the city court's ruling at noon that day in favor of a former O Pais employee for unpaid severance. However when the plaintiff was working for O Pais, the paper was owned by a different company, Editores Associados Lda. The plaintiff was never employed by SOICO, and SOICO claimed not to have known about the court case until the December 20 seizure of the two minibuses. The former employee, Flavia dos Santos, is a sister of the Minister of Women's Affairs, Virgilia Matabele.

13. The total value of the goods seized by the court amounts to approximately USD 66,000, even though the claim is for about USD 20,000. STV recovered its equipment on Jan. 2 after posting a USD 20,000 bond.

14. Several institutions, including Mozambican chapter of the Southern African Media Institute (MISA), the Association of Newspaper Companies (AEJ), the Mozambican Human Rights League (LDH), opposition political party leaders, the Confederation of Business Associations (CTA), and religious representatives, among others, have expressed support for SOICO by sending out press releases or issuing on-air statements against the court's action. Several businesses quickly offered assistance so that STV could remain on the air. Even the former owner of O Pais issued a written statement expressing his solidarity towards SOICO, claiming that the dispute had nothing to do with the media group.

15. Comment: Judging from commentaries in the media and what we hear "on the street", many believe the court's intention was to damage STV because it is independent and therefore relatively unbiased (the other local tv station, TVM, is government-run). STV has been the most popular station in the cities where it can be seen. It is suspicious that the police moved within hours after the court ruling (extremely fast by Mozambican standards) in seizing the equipment, making some speculate that the verdict was known prior to issuance. However, Radio Mozambique and newspapers Noticias and Domingo, and the AIM news service - all government owned - have given the seizure considerable coverage, and AIM English-language reporting has questioned the actions of the Maputo City Court. TVM, on the other hand, has conspicuously failed to report on the story.

